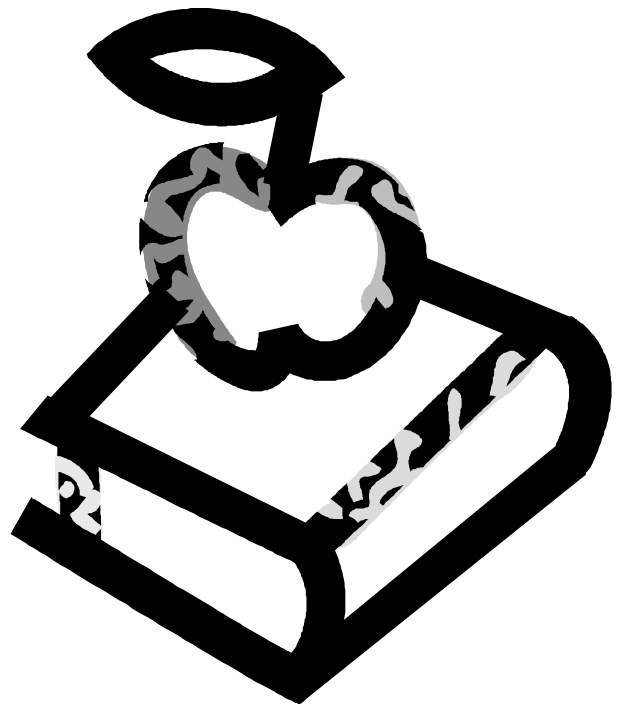


# **The New Jersey Paraprofessional Performance/Portfolio Assessment: A Framework**

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## Introduction

On January 8, 2001, President Bush signed the *No Child Left Behind Act*, federal legislation that would mandate 100 percent proficiency in reading, writing and mathematics for all students. To reach this goal, the law requires that teachers and paraprofessionals become “highly qualified.”

As partners in the instructional process, paraprofessionals who are paid in whole or in part with Title I funds must meet one of the following requirements:

- Complete at least two years of study at an institution of higher education; or
- Obtain an associate’s degree (or higher); or
- Meet a rigorous standard of quality and demonstrate, through a formal state or local academic assessment,
  - ~ Knowledge of, and the ability to assist in, instructing reading, writing, and mathematics; or
  - ~ Knowledge of, and the ability to assist in, instructing reading readiness, writing readiness, and mathematics readiness, as appropriate.

All paraprofessionals hired after January 2, 2002 must already meet *NCLB* requirements as a condition of employment, while those paraprofessionals hired prior to January 8, 2002 have four years, or until January 8, 2006, to meet *NCLB* requirements. As this deadline approaches, the options of earning an Associate’s Degree (approximately 60 college credits) or completing two years of college (approximately 48 college credits) are becoming less realistic for those paraprofessionals who are employed full-time and do not have the time and resources to pursue a college education. Therefore, the New Jersey Department of Education, along with local school districts and the state’s professional education organizations, is focusing on the local, rigorous assessment option as the path for many paraprofessionals to meet the *NCLB* deadline of January 8, 2006.

To date, several commercial tests have been developed to address the areas in which paraprofessionals must be assessed. Most of these assessments are taken in one sitting under timed conditions, which introduces an element of test anxiety for some test takers since their continued employment may depend on the outcome. Some districts have taken the initiative and developed their own local assessments, but these tend to be larger districts with the resources to commit to such a project. There still remain those districts who have asked their local education organizations and the department for guidance on developing and administering local assessments. With this in mind, the department met with representatives of the state’s professional education organizations to develop the framework for a performance/portfolio assessment that districts can adopt as a rigorous, local assessment to meet *NCLB* paraprofessional requirements.

The performance/portfolio assessment for currently employed paraprofessionals is designed to be a year-long process that integrates “on-the-job” skills and knowledge with academic study. The assessment focuses on the content areas defined in the *NCLB* legislation: reading, writing and mathematics and the implementation, adaptation or refinement of instructional assistance activities. Those paraprofessionals who commit to this process will gain knowledge of research-based instructional strategies, engage in professional dialogue, develop a relationship with a professional mentor and participate in professional development activities.



## Design Framework

The performance/portfolio assessment is a two-faceted approach that is built upon four elements as follows: focus areas, reading and writing, professional readings and professional development/workshop participation. Paraprofessionals will develop a portfolio that includes self-assessment of instructional assistance activities and analyses of professional development/workshop participation. The reflective aspect of the design will become the practical component as paraprofessionals' "on-the-job" performance is integrated with the portfolio contents.

The participating paraprofessionals are assigned a professional mentor who will guide them through the assessment process. Here, the paraprofessional and professional mentor establish a formative relationship that is collaborative, collegial and confidential in nature, with the primary goal that the mentor will provide support and guidance throughout the assessment process. The paraprofessional will meet quarterly with his/her mentor to review the contents of the portfolio, discuss progress to date and other relevant issues. Another forum for discussion are the collaborative sessions. Participating paraprofessionals will meet twice during the school year to discuss the portfolio assessment process. This may include talking about professional readings and workshops attended and exchanging instructional assistance strategies and approaches. The combination of academic study and practical experience resembles an internship program.

### Elements

- **Focus Areas:** The *No Child Left Behind Act* focuses on three areas of assessment to measure increases in student achievement: reading, writing and mathematics. The law also mentions these three areas as the basis for paraprofessional assessments designed to meet the requirements of *NCLB*. Therefore, the performance/portfolio assessment focuses on assisting with the teaching of reading, writing and mathematics and uses these areas as the primary source indicators for the portfolio. Because language arts literacy embodies the integration of two critical skills areas, reading and writing, these experiences and activities may be classified as either reading or writing.
- **Reading/Writing:** The legislation seeks to strengthen paraprofessionals' reading/writing skills and understanding of mathematics. The first two skills areas are especially important since student assessments in mathematics include open-ended questions that require students to carefully read the task and craft a written response. The inclusion of many and varied reading/writing exercises in the portfolio demonstrates and documents that paraprofessionals have the necessary higher reading/writing skills needed to be a qualified paraprofessional.
- **Professional Reading:** The academic study component of the performance/portfolio assessment provides ongoing professional growth, as well. Paraprofessionals will read professional literature in the areas of the teaching of reading, the teaching of writing and the teaching of mathematics and use the portfolio as a tool to document completed readings.

The completed portfolio must include a summary/analysis of 30 professional readings. For each month of the school year (10 months), the paraprofessional intern is responsible for reading three professional readings – one per content area. Then for every reading assignment, the paraprofessional must complete a summary/analysis that is entered into the portfolio.

Upon completing the monthly professional reading, the paraprofessional intern will add the reading to the Paraprofessional's Professional Reading Record (Form A) and summarize and evaluate the content of the reading on the Paraprofessional's Professional Reading Summary/Analysis (Form B). The summary/analysis includes a brief description of the reading and how information from the reading can be used in the paraprofessional's everyday practice, i. e., it affirms prior knowledge or introduces new concepts that will inform future practice. The completed summary/analysis should be of sufficient length to effectively summarize the key concepts in the reading and analyze the impact upon instructional assistance strategies used by paraprofessionals, approximately two to five pages.

Readings for the portfolio can be found in professional education journals or publications of professional education organizations. Paraprofessionals may choose to read a lengthier piece, such as a book, and receive more points than the point value assigned for reading a shorter article. Also, each chapter of a large publication may be considered as a separate reading, thereby satisfying the monthly reading requirement for subsequent months. For example, a journal article would be assigned one (1) point and satisfy one month's professional reading requirement, whereas one or several chapters of a textbook would be worth two (2) points and satisfy the professional reading requirement for two months. Readings may include foundational writing or current literature from print and web-based journals in the areas of language arts literacy and mathematics. Reading in language arts literacy may focus primarily on developing writing or reading skills.

- **Professional Development/Workshop Participation:** Paraprofessionals are required to participate in a total of 20 hours of professional development activities, 18 hours of content-specific professional development, and two (2) hours of non-content-specific professional development. To assist paraprofessionals with meeting this professional development requirement, the NJDOE and the state's professional education organizations encourage districts to expand the number of professional development activities open to paraprofessionals. This could be done by including paraprofessionals in the professional development activities available to all instructional staff.

The paraprofessional intern will maintain a record of each activity on the Professional Development/Workshop Participation Record (Form D). Additionally, for each activity, there must be a corresponding summary/analysis that highlights new practices, new insights and new knowledge gained from the experience. Paraprofessionals currently enrolled in college classes, or who have completed college classes in the appropriate content areas, may use this classroom experience as professional development/workshop participation. Also, several class meetings may be counted as workshops under the appropriate content areas. Each class meeting can be used to meet the hourly requirement for professional development/workshop participation, provided that the paraprofessional intern records each class meeting on the proper form and completes a summary/analysis for each meeting. For example, one 90-minute class session in children's literature can be entered in the portfolio as a one-and-a-half-hour professional development activity on reading. The next class session may also be entered as a one-and-one-half-hour professional development activity in reading, thereby providing a total of three hours for professional development in reading.



This allows the paraprofessional to earn higher education credits, as well as contribute to his/her portfolio.

### **Reporting Documentation**

- **Critical Learning Log:** Currently, many districts require that paraprofessionals maintain a periodic record of their instructional assistance activities. The performance/portfolio assessment will expand upon this practice. Paraprofessionals will maintain a periodic critical learning log that shows how new practices or insights are integrated into existing classroom practices, or how they can inform future practices. Entries should also discuss how old practices have been affirmed by participation in the assessment process. This component serves not only as documentation by recording this experience, but also demonstrates professional growth. Entries in the log serve as a self-assessment, suggesting future improvements or recording newly developed strategies.
- **Self-Assessment:** Throughout the assessment process, paraprofessionals are expected to draw upon all of these elements, including professional readings, professional development/workshop participation and critical learning log entries, as an opportunity to assess, refine and expand upon current classroom practices. Such professional growth is documented in the description of an activity that incorporates a new or refined instructional assistance strategy taken from a professional reading or participation in a professional development/workshop activity. After this activity, the paraprofessional intern will complete a self-assessment rubric that articulates his/her perception about the success of implementing this refined or new instructional assistance strategy. This rubric is designed to provide the paraprofessional with further insight into his/her instructional assistance activities; therefore, it should not be considered an evaluative tool. The completed portfolio will contain three (3) activity descriptions and (3) corresponding self-assessment rubrics (one for each focus area: reading, writing and mathematics).
- **Portfolio Review Conference:** Paraprofessionals and their mentors will meet on a quarterly basis in October, January, March and June to discuss the assessment process. During the quarterly review, the paraprofessional and mentor should discuss the contents of the portfolio, current and planned instructional assistance strategies, ideas presented in professional readings and/or professional development/workshop participation and future steps. At this time, the paraprofessional intern should seek clarification, ask for assistance and discuss strategies to facilitate the assessment process. The professional mentor should discuss the paraprofessional's progress and collaborate with the paraprofessional by providing suggestions or recommendations for professional growth, as well as recommending articles or training that may be of special benefit for the paraprofessional. By meeting quarterly, paraprofessionals have more frequent interaction with their mentors, thereby receiving more timely recommendations and assistance.

### **Portfolio Recordkeeping**

To maintain records of assessment progress, paraprofessionals should complete several forms, all of which document their work and are submitted with the final portfolio.



- **Forms A-1, A-2, A-3 – Professional Reading Documentation**  
For the paraprofessional to maintain a record of the professional readings completed for each month of the school year. There is one form for each content area: reading (A-1), writing (A-2) and mathematics (A-3). All three completed forms must be included in the final portfolio submission.
- **Form B – Paraprofessional's Professional Reading Summary/Analysis**  
This form is used to guide the paraprofessional's summary and analysis required for each monthly professional reading. For every reading title recorded on Forms A-1, A-2 and A-3, there should be a corresponding Paraprofessional's Professional Reading Summary/Analysis.
- **Form C – Professional Development/Workshop Participation Record**  
The completed portfolio must include a record of the professional development and workshop activities used to meet the 20-hour requirement. This form is used to record all professional development and workshop activities.
- **Form D – Paraprofessional's Professional Development/Workshop Participation Summary/Analysis**  
After participating in any professional development activity or workshop, the paraprofessional must complete this form to summarize and analyze the activity. For every activity recorded on Form C, there should be a corresponding Paraprofessional's Professional Development/Workshop Participation Summary/Analysis.
- **Form E – Self-Assessment Rubric (4 pages)**  
The completed portfolio must contain three (3) self-assessment rubrics, one per content area. This form is used to record the paraprofessional's perceptions after implementing an adapted or refined instructional assistance activity. On the first page of the form the paraprofessional enters his/her identifying information. Pages two, three and four are where the paraprofessional completes the actual self-assessment using the rubric and guiding self-reflection questions. This form is designed to provide the paraprofessional with insight into his/her instructional assistance activities. It is not an evaluative tool.
- **Form F – Performance/Portfolio Assessment Process Indicators (2 pages)**  
Successful completion of the performance/portfolio assessment is contingent upon the paraprofessional's meeting all the indicators. The first page of this form is a matrix of each indicator and the required point value. Here the paraprofessional documents the points earned for each indicator. During each quarterly conference, the professional mentor and paraprofessional should use this form as a reference to gauge the paraprofessional's progress in the assessment process and enter the date of each conference on the second page of the form. On the second page the building principal enters his/her name, signature and the date to make a final recommendation that the paraprofessional has successfully met NCLB requirements. This recommendation must be authorized by the principal, not a designee.

### **Portfolio Maintenance**

The paraprofessional's employing district is responsible for maintaining a record of the completed portfolio. The building principal must complete the required authorization attesting



that the paraprofessional has met *NCLB* requirements through the path of a rigorous, local assessment. For those paraprofessionals who successfully complete the assessment process, the district and/or school should issue a certificate of completion, or another form of documentation attesting to the paraprofessional's status. It is recommended that paraprofessionals maintain one copy of the completed portfolio for their personal records.





## Conclusion

This two-fold assessment process entails a level of academic study that is comparable to that of formal higher education and the rigor of commercially developed paraprofessional assessments. Paraprofessionals who complete this process will have demonstrated the theoretical knowledge and practical skills needed to assist in the instruction of reading, writing and mathematics and increase the proficiency levels of the students with whom they work. Additionally, this option provides the paraprofessional with a research base to draw upon in his/her daily instructional assistance duties, knowledge from professional development activities and a tool to assess performance when integrating new instructional assistance activities. Also, the relationship between the paraprofessional intern and professional mentor builds the foundation for professional collaboration and support that can extend beyond the assessment process and throughout a career.

